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ABSTRACT

Because of the tendency to reject Black English speakers, perhaps as an excuse for maintaining social and racial prejudices, teachers should understand that nonstandard dialects result from geographical and/or cultural isolation and conflict (as in Applachian English), and from linguistic conflict (as in Chicano English). The language of many black people reflects both pidgin English--minimal communication produced by a conflict between seventeenth-century English and West African languages, and West African language structure--lacking verb or noun endings. Black English features, as seen in a typical example of one black student's composition papers, consist of few inflectional verb and noun endings, and the unusual use of derivational morphemes. To effectively help in the development of black students' writing, teachers' usual compulsive concern for correct mechanics should be replaced by an emphasis on students' writing more coherently (especially in theme development) and interestingly in their own dialect. (An appendix includes the black student's paper and an examination of Black English morphological examples.) (JM)

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BLACK DIALECT? OR BLACK FACE?

The ethnographer Thomas Kochman has pointed out that "people's attitudes towards other people's speech are merely an extension of people's attitudes towards their culture and the people of that culture."[1] Kochman's point is that it's really black faces that employers dislike, not black dialect; that black dialect is just an excuse for discriminating against black job applicants. I am haunted by the possibility that many teachers may similarly reject the oral and written dialect of black students primarily because these teachers reject the students themselves, reject them (at least unconsciously) because of their social, cultural, and racial origins.

If it seems that I am going overboard with a charge of racism, let me pull back with the reminder that a so-called "nonstandard" dialect is simply the dialect of a group that has no political power or social position to speak of. Thus the tendency to look down upon Black English speakers and consequently upon their speech is part of a larger, more general tendency to look down upon the "have nots" in society and to use as an excuse anything about them which is different (and which can therefore be construed as a deficit). In the case of black students, our typical social snobbery just happens to be compounded by racial ethnocentrism. And even we teachers of English may have been unconsciously using students' black dialect as an excuse for maintaining our social and racial prejudices.

The black linguist and educator Kenneth Johnson has suggested that blacks should learn a standard dialect "in order to rob the dominant culture of excuses to discriminate against Blacks," thus enabling the dominant culture to recognize and deal with its racism.[2] I would propose that we turn this suggestion inside out, that we of the dominant culture learn Black English or at least study its history and structure in order to gain more respect for the dialect and thus to rob ourselves of this excuse for discrimination. At the very least, the study of Black English should better enable us to understand the CCCC resolution "Students' Right to Their Own Language."

It is with this hope in mind that I offer a thumbnail sketch of the history of Black English and then discuss some of its features, concentrating on those features that seem to occur most often and most consistently in the writing of college students.

First, I would argue that there is no justification for perpetuating the myth that "nonstandard" dialects result from physical or mental deficits or from sheer laziness. "Nonstandard" dialects stem from two major sources: first, geographical isolation and/or cultural isolation and conflict, which accounts for the "nonstandardness" of Appalachian English; and second, linguistic conflict, which accounts for the "nonstandardness" of Chicano English. Both the linguistic factor and the cultural factor have been involved in the development and maintenance of Black English.

To begin with, the linguistic conflict between West African languages and the English of seventeenth-century traders led to the development of what linguists call a pidgin language, a minimal communication language that because of its limited function is always

relatively simple in vocabulary and structure. For example, pidgin languages tend to omit redundant or "unnecessary" grammatical features, such as the third singular verb ending; he walk is perfectly clear without the nicety of the /s/ ending. In context, even the past tense ending may be redundant, as for example in yesterday I walk, where the adverb yesterday is quite sufficient to convey the pastness of the action. So, too, noun plural endings are often dispensable, especially if there is a preceding quantifier: two boy, all the boy, a lot of boy. And the possessive relationship between two nouns can usually be made clear simply by juxtaposition, as in the girl foot, the man money.

The omission of such redundancies is typical of pidgin languages, regardless of the source languages they draw upon. In the case of the pidgins that developed among Europeans and West Africans, though, there seems to have been an additional factor contributing to the omission of these endings, namely the structure of the West African languages themselves. Apparently most of them had no verb or noun endings but instead used other means of indicating concepts like pastness and plurality.[3] The language of many black people in the United States reflects even today a pidgin and West African heritage, as a result of the continuing social and cultural isolation of blacks from whites.

Such insights into the history of Black English have been provided in recent years by creole linguists like Beryl Bailey, William Stewart, and J.L. Dillard,[4] while sociolinguists like William Labov and Roger Shuy have provided us with insights into the morphology, syntax, and phonology (particularly the consonant and vowel sounds) that characterize much of today's ghetto and rural black speech and distinguish it (in degree if

not always in kind) from dialects of a non-black origin.[5]

Of course there is no one-to-one correlation between spoken Black English and written Black English, since speech and writing are two separate outputs of the same deep structure. Nevertheless, many speakers of Black English do use some Black English features in their writing. However, there are relatively few features that occur with some frequency and consistency in the writing of older students, particularly college students. Walt Wolfram and Marcia Whiteman found that it was mainly Black English morphology that was represented in the writing of the tenth graders they studied.[6] Similarly, Daisy Crystal found that the writing of a group of ghetto students entering college showed mainly the absence of past tense and third singular markers.[7] Since I have found essentially the same pattern in the writing of my own college students (and for that matter in the writing of younger students as well), I draw examples from "Contrast of Death and Killing" (see Appendix), a paper written by a junior who elected to enroll in my freshman writing class a year ago. For convenience, let's call her Brenda.

I studied the Black English features in five of Brenda's papers, all but one of them argumentative, in order to see whether the use of dialect features in "Contrast of Death and Killing" is typical of her writing. In most respects it is.

There are no simple past tense verbs in this particular paper, or at least none that form the past by the addition of -ed, but even a quick reading will show that there are a number of past participle forms (most functioning as verbs, some as adjectivals) which do not have the -ed regularly found in mainstream dialects. The following

are some examples:

Lines 00-00: But many people are been kidnapped and kill and no one pay the price

Lines 00-00: Other diseases can be cure if caught at an early age.

Lines 00-00: no medicine or cure has been develop.

Lines 00-00: a person can become disable and have to be depended on others.

Lines 00-00: the environment is mess up.

The Black English past participles occur about 70% of the time in this paper; that is, regular past participles occur without -ed about 70% of the time. Overall, Brenda omits past tense and past participle -ed about 80% to 90% of the time in her writing.

Another prominent Black English characteristic is the omission of the third singular verb ending, as in the following examples from Brenda's paper:

Lines 00-00: no one pay the price

Lines 00-00: does this really mean that no one handle these records

Lines 00-00: Each day the society present the death total

Lines 00-00: All the doctors know is, what it arise from.

The third singular verb ending is absent about 80% of the time in this paper and in Brenda's writing as a whole.

Noun plural markers are absent much less frequently, but still noticeably, as for example in

Lines 00-00: These statements only apply to the uncounted record that are claim

Lines 00-00: Some shooter aim at one thing and shoot another thing

Lines 00-00: Many more killing have taken place

Plural endings are absent about 45% of the time in this particular paper, but only about a third of the time overall. Noun possessive endings seem to be absent more consistently (in 7 out of 10 cases overall), but the possessive construction occurs so infrequently that one could almost fail to notice the uninflected possessives. Here, we have two examples ("another person life," lines 00-00, and "many people lives," lines 00-00) balanced against one inflected possessive ("ones life," lines 00-00).

As the "Death and Killing" paper suggests, then, the Black English pattern that seems to occur most often in the writing of college students is the absence of inflectional endings on verbs and to a lesser extent on nouns. Other features do occur, of course, such as the absence of is and are, the use of was rather than were, and even an occasional multiple negative, as in lines 00 and 00 of the "Contrast" paper: "There are going to be diseases that no physician can not find nor cure." Such features as these are syntactic. Black English phonological features are also occasionally reflected in the spelling of college students. But it is the morphological features--the absence of the inflectional verb and noun endings--that occur most frequently and most consistently.

Another Black English feature may be the unusual use (unusual from a mainstream point of view) of derivational morphemes. In Brenda's "Death and Killing" paper, this comes through mainly as the unexpected absence or unexpected presence of derivational morphemes. First, there is the absence:

> Lines 00-00: The death that rip through this country is uncounted for [rather than unaccounted for]

> Lines 00-00: records [that] are straight out [rather than straightened out; here both -en- and -ed are absent]

Second, there is the unexpected presence of derivational morphemes, as in lines 00 and 00, where she writes of "the high inexpense of killing" rather than the high expense, and in line 00, where she writes that "they usually die before the limited is up." The use of -ed here probably reflects Brenda's uncertainty about the use of the -ed ending; it seems to be a hypercorrection. A related example occurs in lines 00 to 00, where she writes that "a person can become disable and have to be depended on others." Here she uses -ed instead of -ent, while at the same time writing disable rather than disabled.

Brenda's most interesting use of derivational morphemes occurs in what was supposed to be a thesis statement on premarital sex:

> Permarital sex as it stand today don't have all the moral standards as it did before. But the religion standards are still in favor of the situation because its a committee of sin that make a woman not purtian. If a girl was founded to be not a virgin then she was look down on, but as it stand no one is really paying any attention until there is an infantry involve, then she has committee the sin of the world.
>
> Permarital sex has no right or wrong, because the passion feeling overpower the stand of don't do it. In Yvonne case she was taught that its wrong, but now it has less value.

We find here the omission of derivational morphemes, as in "religion standards" and "passion feeling," the addition of derivational morphemes, as in "infantry" rather than infant, and the use of one derivational morpheme where most of us would expect another; "committee of sin" rather than committing or commission of sin.

One may well wonder why I mention this unexpected use of derivational morphology as possibly a characteristic of Black English. At

present I have no solid evidence, only a hypothesis: it seems to me that such unexpected use of derivational morphology may be a reflection of the oral "fancy talk" tradition discussed at some length in J. L. Dillard's Black English (Random House, 1972). According to Dillard, the fancy talk tradition of oratory probably was brought from Africa to the New World in the earliest days of slavery (p. 251). The main characteristic of fancy talk seems to be flashy vocabulary, vocabulary which to mainstream speakers often seems ornate to the point of misuse and even malapropism; as Dillard points out, it was considered a fine accomplishment to be able to use "glittering and sesquepedelian words and phrases" without schoolmarmish regard for dictionary precision of meaning (p. 247). An important "side effect" (according to Dillard) is the use of derivational morphology that would be considered deviant from a mainstream point of view (p. 249).

This gets us back to Brenda's paper. It seems at least possible that her unexpected use of derivational morphemes reflects this oral fancy talk tradition, transmitted perhaps both through the street corner man of words (as Geneva Smitherman has suggested to me) and through the black preacher, whom Dillard characterizes as being to some extent a fancy talker (p. 261). Brenda's writing shows relatively little use, however, of "malapropisms," the outstanding example being "Gonorrhea can be just as damage but when caught at the early stage leave no harrasser" (lines 00-00). A less striking example is "some [diseases] are effected on people by 'mother nature'" (lines 00 and 00), and there are at least a couple of other possibles. But for the most part, Brenda stays away from malapropism.

In summary, then, the major Black English features in Brenda's

writing are morphological. She uses few inflectional endings on verbs and nouns, reflecting the pidgin and West African ancestry of her dialect, and she uses derivational morphemes (and sometimes base morphemes) in ways that may reflect a "fancy talk" tradition of African origin.

So now what? What are we going to do with this kind of writing? I would suggest, as I did at the outset, that we start by recognizing it as the outgrowth of long-standing, respectable, and positive cultural traditions. And perhaps with this recognition we are better prepared to understand what the Executive Committee of the CCCC meant by its 1972 resolution on students' right to their own language. The Spring 1974 version of this resolution begins:

> We affirm the students' right to their own patterns and varieties of language--the dialects of their nurture or whatever dialects in which they find their own identity and style. (p. 2 of the Spring 1974 document, "Students' Right to Their Own Language")

The Executive Committee and the committee that drafted the background statement for this resolution seem to have had two basic reasons for urging a "hands off" policy toward students' dialects. The primary reason, the humanistic one, is explicitly stated in the resolution itself:

> Language scholars long ago denied that the myth of a standard American dialect has any validity. The claim that any one dialect is unacceptable amounts to an attempt of one social group to exert its dominance over another. (pp. 2-3)

And as Geneva Smitherman has written in the February 1974 issue of English Journal, "that sho ain humane" (p. 17).

The Committee's second reason for urging a "hands off" policy toward students' dialects seems to be an educational matter of putting

first things first--and in writing, they take this to mean emphasizing content and deemphasizing "correctness." As they say in the background statement, "If we can convince our students that spelling, punctuation, and usage are less important than content, we have removed a major obstacle in their developing the ability to write" (p. 8).

But first, of course, we must convince ourselves that, as the Committee says, the least important aspect of writing is mechanics, including the use of so-called standard dialect forms. Unfortunately there are still many teachers who consider it a top priority task to eradicate Black English features from their students' writing, or at least to make their students bidialectal as writers. Thus in her article on dialect mixture (Spring/Fall 1972 Florida FL Reporter) Daisy Crystal writes that she devised a test to examine college freshmen's competence in standard English, feeling that

> Whether they [the students] could write interesting compositions or knew how to "organize" their writing seemed trivial in comparison, particularly since students take Freshman English to learn precisely that. (p.44)

As far as I'm concerned, that kind of attitude has been largely responsible for students' inability to write effectively, to write with precision and conviction. Every English teacher--from kindergarten on up--seems to think that his or her job is to get kids to get kids to write "correctly," and that somebody else farther up the line is supposed to get kids to actually say something worth saying (or rather write something worth writing) and to do it in an interesting and effective way.

If we college and junior college teachers can't revolutionize the teaching of English overnight, at least we can take stock of where we

ourselves are at. What would you do, for example, if "Contrast of Death and Killing" were turned in to you? Would you concern yourself first of all with Brenda's "nonstandard" use of morphology and occasionally of syntax? If so, I ask you, I plead with you, to study the paper again. Would it really be a good paper if all the dialect features were "corrected"? There does seem to be a loose organizational pattern here, with the writer moving from death in general to death by murder and suicide to death by disease. But I can't find a coherent thesis, and the supporting details are not specific enough to hold the interest of many readers, even the most sympathetic. If this lack of coherence and specificity proved typical of the student's writing (and in this case it does), then I hope you would begin not by trying to get rid of her dialect features but by helping her write more coherently and interestingly in her own dialect.

For far too long, we have been ineffective in helping many black students develop their writing ability because we have been more concerned with mechanics than with the meat, the content. We may find it easier to reorder our priorities if we remind ourselves that a compulsive concern for all sorts of mechanics stems largely from linguistic snobbery, which is born of social, cultural, and racial snobbery. If we persist in concerning ourselves first of all with mechanics, perhaps we had better ask ourselves again: what have we really been rejecting, our students' dialects or the students themselves?

Appendix

Contrast of Death and Killing

The death that rip throught this country is uncounted for. The only death that is on record is the ones that are provide in the newspapers in the obituary section. But many people are been kidnapped and kill and no one pay the price or the case is put back for later reconsideration. The misphap of small and big people downing is not accounted for. Oh yes, you might see a small write up in the paper and then it left alone. These statements only apply to the uncounted record that are claim, that the record are straight out, but does this really mean that no one handle these records that are not authorize.

Each day the society present the death total by the high inexpense of killing people all over. Speaking of killing mean taken another person life. Not only does people take lives, but objects take lives, for instance the shaggy automible that are been built today. Another killer is the airplane, that are falling right out the sky killing thousands of people. The plane only disguard alot of bodies all over the country. Another killer, is the weapon, that are put in unmanageable hands that put it to no good use. To aim and get what is being shot at, depend on the shooter. Some shooter aim at one thing and shoot another thing, like animals or a person.

Killing only contrast to any mean of taken a life. Like the shoot out at Southern University where two students was kill. Many more killing have taken place down through the years that was merely uncause for, that lie between both blacks and whites. Then dieing got out rages, people utilizing death by taking their own life by overdopes. Another form of death is the wide spread of different diseases.

Many of the disease doesn't really have a cure or some are effected on people by "mother nautre." Diseases that are taken many people lives are cancer, syphilis, gonorrhea, ruebella, and phuemonia. Other diseases can be cure if caught at an early age. Cancer have has many researches, but no medicine or cure has been develop. All the doctors know is, what it arise from. When a person have cancer, they know there is little chance of them staying alive, but after a person is given a certain length of time to live, they usually die before the limited is up. But the other disease arise from unknown bacteria in the system except syphilis and gonorrhea. Syphilis come from toilet stoop and part way sexual intercourse, the same as gonorrhea. The only time syphilis takes ones life, is when there are the bad case, but some time a person can become disable and have to be depended on others. Gonorrhea can be just as damage but when caught at the early stage leave no harrasser. Finally the disease or sickness is phuemonia, when a person just down right don't take care of themselves when the weather is bad.

In conclusion there is really no ending to killing and dieing when the environment is mess up. But it just goes to show that the scripture in the bible are true. There are going to be diseases that no physician can not find nor cure, or wars will never end.

Black English Morphology
in "Contrast of Death and Killing"

Inflectional Morphology

1. Absence of past participle -ed

   Lines 3-4: But many people are been kidnapped and kill and no one pay the price

   Lines 28-29: Other diseases can be cure if caught at an early age.

   Line 29: no medicine or cure has been develop.

2. Absence of third singular ending

   Lines 3-4: no one pay the price

   Lines 8-9: does this really mean that no one handle these records

   Lines 29-30: All the doctors know is, what it arise from.

3. Absence of noun plural ending

   Lines 6-7: These statements only apply to the uncounted record that are claim

   Lines 17-18: Some shooter aim at one thing and shoot another thing

   Lines 20-21: Many more killing have taken place

4. Absence of noun possessive ending

   Lines 11-12: Speaking of killing mean taken another person life.

   Line 26: Diseases that are taken many people lives are . . . .

Derivational Morphology

1. Absence of derivational morpheme

   Line 1: The death that rip through this country is uncounted for [rather than unaccounted for]

   Line 8: records [that] are straight out [rather than straightened out; here both -en- and -ed are absent]

2. Presence of derivational morpheme

   Lines 10-11: the high inexpense of killing [rather than expense]

   Line 32: they usually die before the limited is up [rather than limit]

3. Substitution of derivational morpheme

   Lines 36-37: a person can become disable and have to be depended on others [rather than dependent]

FOOTNOTES

[1]"Social Factors in the Consideration of Teaching Standard English," Florida FL Reporter, 7 (Spring/Summer 1969), p. 88.

[2]"Should Black Children Learn Standard English?" Viewpoints: Bulletin of the School of Education, Indiana University, 47 (March 1971), p. 91.

[3]See, for example, David Dalby's fine article in Black-White Speech Relationships, published in 1971 by the Center for Applied Linguistics. Lorenzo Turner's article in the same volume is also excellent.

[4]Much of the groundwork for modern creolists was laid by the black linguist Lorenzo Turner in his Africanisms in the Gullah Dialect, first published in 1949 (and now available from the Arno Press). Dillard thoroughly documents the creole history of Black English in Black English: Its History and Usage in the United States (Random House, 1972).

[5]A good source of information on both the history and structure of Black English is Robbins Burling's English in Black and White (Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1973).

[6]"The Role of Dialect Interference in Composition," Florida FL Reporter, 9 (Spring/Fall 1971), p. 38.

[7]"Dialect Mixture and Sorting Out the Concept of Freshman English Remediation," Florida FL Reporter, 10 (Spring/Fall 1972), p. 44.